

SPARTAN HELOTAGE—CHARACTER AND ORIGINS

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«Like donkeys» so Tyrtaios described the Spartans' unlucky enemies sometime during the 7th century B.C. (but the Spartan warriors chanted these very verses still in classical times¹) «suffering under heavy yokes, by painful force compelled to bring their masters half of all the produce that the soil brought forth»²—but why? On what idea, on what political concept and on what legal structures were these contributions based? The most common answer—on Helotage—encounters two difficulties: the first that it is not undisputed, and the second that it only names the phenomenon but does not really explain it.

We should start with the first of the two questions: Was it Helotage that Tyrtaios knew and described, or did he think of some other, quite different form of dependence? In fact he did not say that what he described was or was called Helotage—he simply described what these Messenian «donkeys» did. And thus the field may be thought open to debate, as Nino Luraghi, following some very old ideas by Ulrich Karstedt, recently pointed out³. Helotage—so he thinks—had nothing to do with war, at least not directly, and it did not originate from the 7th century

¹ Tyrtaios' elegies belonged to the officially recognized canon of regularly sung songs; cf.: Athen. 14.630 F.

² Tyrt. fr. 5 D.

³ KAHRSTEDT U. Die spartanische Agrarwirtschaft // Hermes. 1919. Bd 54. S. 279–294; here: S. 290–294; LURAGHI N. Der Erdbebenaufstand und die Entstehung der messenischen Identität // Gab es das griechische Wunder? Griechenland zwischen dem Ende des 6. und der Mitte des 5. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. Eds. D. Papenfuß, V.-M. Strocka. Mainz, 2001. S. 279–301; IDEM. Becoming Messenian // JHS. 2002. Vol. 122. S. 45–69; IDEM. Helotic Slavery Reconsidered // Sparta. Beyond the Mirage. Ed. by A. Powell, S. Hodkinson. Swansea, 2002. P. 227–248. Cf. also some of the ideas which N. BIRGALIAS (Helotage and Spartan Social Organization // Sparta. Beyond the Mirage. Ed. by A. Powell, S. Hodkinson. London 2002. P. 249–266) recently forwarded.

either. Rather, he says, it should be understood as the result of some 6th-century economic development: Having seized the fertile plains of Messenia the Spartans took the best parts of the land for themselves, leaving nothing but the wretched rests for the Messenians. And then, he says, being left with this unproductive soil only, the Messenians had to encounter a lot quite similar to the one the Athenian small peasants had to face in the times of Solon. The result, he thinks, was the same in both cases: an enslavement of the agrarian debtors. As such a development, however, should not be expected to come about at the very first moment after the conquest of the land and the loss of the fertile plots, all this should be thought to be a 6th-century development—thus leaving no room for Tyrtaios to have known and sung about something like Helotage. And in fact the forced labourers Tyrtaios knew, Luraghi thinks, cannot have been Helots for two other reasons as well, one to be found in the writings of Aelian, the other in those of Pausanias: As Aelian says that after the First Messenian War the Spartans forced the Messenian «free women» to take part in their masters' funerary ceremonies, the Messenians cannot have been enslaved by then—in this case the women would not have been free. And as Pausanias, swallowing a pro-Messenian propaganda from the 4th or 3rd century B.C., did not hesitate to cite Tyrtaios' verses, he at least cannot have identified Tyrtaios' «donkeys» with classical Helots either: The pro-Messenian propaganda, on the one hand, tried to show that Helotage was a recent injustice. By citing Tyrtaios, on the other hand, this injustice would have been proved to be an ancient one—if, what Tyrtaios described, would really have been Helotage in its classical form. And as Pausanias will not have made such a mistake (so Luraghi says), Tyrtaios' «donkeys» cannot have been any kind of slaves comparable to classical Helots in any way.

Both these arguments, however, must fail. As to Aelian and his «free (Messenian) women»: What Aelian tried to do was to tell a moving story, nothing else. In order to make up such a story he in fact took recourse to the material collected by Pausanias. But it is far from sure that he knew anything more than what he found there. Even this argument alone is apt to shake his reliability: As he simply cannot have found anything about «free women» in Pausanias' description, we have to suspect him of pure invention right from the start. Moreover, he provably did not only invent what he could not find; he also heavily distorted what he in fact found: As he was not interested in handing down political or contractual details accurately, but was interested in his moving story only, even such a straightforward stipulation as the one according to which the Messenians had to bring to their masters 'half of all the produce that the land brings forth'—a stipulation he must have known from Pausanias' quotation of Tyrtaios!—degenerates into a robbing of 'half of all the property found in Messenia' in Aelian's text. To base anything on his 'free women' seems simply

arbitrary. There is no evidence in Aelian additional to that which Pausanias employed.

And as to him: We should keep in mind, I think, that what Pausanias wrote cannot simply be identified with 4th- and 3rd-century propaganda—though he certainly made use of the material he found there. But, of course, his interest was with the material only, not with the political argument. In fact he found great delight in the heroic and colourful picture this propaganda had drawn, but he did not take part in its political ambitions; he did not argue. And as he did not argue, he did not have any reason whatsoever to avoid any information that was detrimental to the ends this propaganda aimed at either. In other words: How does Luraghi want to know if Pausanias found this quotation in the pro-Messenian propaganda? Why shall he not have found it somewhere else and then made use of it? And there is still another objection: Even supposed, he could and did find it here: How does Luraghi want to know when this propaganda swallowed Tyrtaios' verses? Let us suppose that they were integrated into the image which the Messenians promoted of themselves after the (wrong) supposition had arisen that Helots did not have to deliver half of their crops but a fixed *quantum*⁴—would not Tyrtaios verses now perfectly fit in the propaganda and its political aims (though describing exactly what archaic and classical Helotage had been)?

There is still an additional argument we should not simply pass over: the fact that Luraghi's model—though it might possibly explain the helots' deliverances for their masters—cannot explain the outstanding peculiarities that made Helotage such a unique phenomenon, such a peculiar communal kind of slavery: The prohibition to sell one's own Helots⁵, the prohibition of manumission⁶, the fact that the Helots' rents were ultimately fixed by the state⁷ and (above all) the annual declaration of war⁸—all these peculiarities that should be explained historically remain unexplainable by his ideas; not a single one of them is known from Solonian Athens, which Luraghi chose to serve as a model. Simply to denote these peculiarities as «distinctively Spartan» or as «functional to Spartan domination» will not suffice if the goal is to explain what Helotage was.

So this argumentation cannot be counted to be convincing, neither in general nor in detail. And thus we should at least reckon with the possibility that the Messenians Tyrtaios spoke about in fact were Helots (and that

⁴ For this cf.: S. HODKINSON. Sharecropping and Sparta's economic exploitation of the Helots // *Philolakon*. Studies in Honour of H. Catling. Ed. by J.M. Sanders. London, 1992. P. 123–134; IDEM. Property and Wealth in Classical Sparta. London, 2000. P. 125–131.

⁵ Ephor. *FgrHist* 70 F 117.

⁶ Ephor. *Ibid*.

⁷ Plut. *Mor.* 239 e.

⁸ Arist. *Fr.* 538 Rose (= Plut. *Lyc.* 27.7).

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the Spartan warriors, who chanted these verses in classical times, did not sing about a remote history they can hardly have understood, but about a contemporary reality they all knew)—an idea that would gain much persuasive power if we could show that Tyrtaios' description in fact helps to explain the peculiar structures or features of classical Helotage (or *vice versa*).

These, the main structural features of classical Helotage, however, are far from clear or self-explaining and consequently are highly disputed in modern research. Some aspects are clear (as, *e.g.*, the fact that Helotage was a somehow peculiar form of slavery, the fact that the whole Spartan citizenry lived on the Helots' rents, or the fact that Helotage was especially degrading in character⁹), others are still most puzzling. For example there are several hints to the fact that Helots were not counted to be the private property of their owners, but common property of the state (as, *e.g.*, the prohibition of sale or manumission, or, to take another example, the fact that at least some of the Spartan youths were regularly sent out to kill helots regardless of any Spartan holder's property rights). On the other hand there are some very clear hints to the fact that they were not thought to be common property at all: Xenophon, *e.g.*, says that it was every Spartiate's right to make use of every other Spartiate's horses or dogs or Helots¹⁰—and as horses and dogs were surely privately owned he clearly implies a private ownership of helots as well, tempered only by the typical Spartan far-reaching camaradery¹¹. And there is a similar confusion about the question if a Helot was really a slave plain and simple—an object, *res*, in legal terms—, or if he was a legal subject, *persona* (which is to say, at the same time, that it is not clear if he was «owned» by anyone at all or if he simply «belonged» to someone, if he was something like a serf, belonging to some individual or to the community of the Spartan citizenry as a whole). There are hints to both these ends: The fact, *e.g.*, that every Helot had to reckon with being murdered at any time makes him look very much like an animal, like a *res*. On the other hand, the fact that it was an underlying declaration of war that made all this possible or the fact that there were contractual arrangements like the prohibition of sale might be (and have been) taken to prove that Helots were legal subjects.

Contradictory features like these have not only puzzled modern research. Our ancient authorities already quite obviously had simply to guess when they tried to explain what Helots were. Pausanias¹²—this is true—

⁹ See : DUCAT J. Le mépris des Hilotes // *Annales*. 1974. Vol. 29. P. 1451 sqq.

¹⁰ Xen. *Lak. Pol.* 6.3.

¹¹ Cf. also the full-scale argumentation by HODKINSON. *Property and Wealth*. P. 113–116.

¹² Paus. III.20.6.

unreservedly took them to be public property and therefore simply called them «slaves of the community». Strabo, however, was much more cautious, calling them «public slaves, so to speak»¹³. And whereas Plutarch took Helotage to be the most oppressive form of slavery¹⁴, Pollux assures us that the Helots' status was somewhere «between free and unfree»¹⁵. Theopompos finally entangled himself completely in his effort to define what Helots were: «The free people who are slaves», he wrote, «are called Helots in Sparta»¹⁶. So, all in all, as certainty can be gained neither from our ancient authorities' descriptions nor from their definitions, modern research was simply doomed to fail. More or less the end of this line of research has been marked by Jean Ducat's sigh from 1978: «Le statut des hilotes», he wrote, «ne peut se définir en quelques mots, et toutes les formules qui ont été présentées à cette fin sont insatisfaisantes par quelque chose»¹⁷. Obviously we have to look for a new access.

The idea I would like to forward¹⁸ depends on an observation which was made by Hans van Wees and published some years ago—an observation that has nothing to do with Sparta in special or the Spartan Helotage as such, but concerns a general Greek custom reflected by Homer¹⁹. As van Wees pointed out the Homeric *epos* already knew the division of goods and chattels into halves and deliverances of these halves—and it knew these deliverances in a very specific context only: Handing over half of all the movable property that was inside the walls of a town was a generally accepted method for a city under attack to buy an attacker off and make

¹³ Strab. VIII.5.4.

¹⁴ Plut. *Lyc.* 28.11.

¹⁵ Poll. 3.83.

¹⁶ *FGrHist* 115 F 122 B.

¹⁷ DUCAT J. Aspects de l'hilotisme // *AncSoc.* 1978. Vol. 9. P. 5–46; here: 5; see also: ALCOCK S.E. A simple case of exploitation? The helots of Messenia // *Money, Labour and Land. Approaches to the Economies of Ancient Greece.* Ed. by P. Cartledge, E.E. Cohen, L. Foxhall. London, 2002. P. 185–199, here: 189 sq.

¹⁸ See also: LINK S. Das frühe Sparta. Untersuchungen zur spartanischen Staatsbildung im 7. und 6. Jahrhundert v. Chr. St. Katharinen, 2000. S. 45–58. The idea has for the first time been hinted at (to the best of my knowledge) by SINGOR H.W. Spartan land lots and helot rents // *De agricultura. In memoriam Pieter Willem de Neeve.* Eds. H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg et al. Amsterdam, 1993. P. 31–60; here: 43 sq.

¹⁹ VAN WEES H. Status Warriors. War, Violence and Society in Homer and History. Amsterdam, 1992. P. 384 n. 47; see also: JACKSON A. War and raids for booty in the world of Odysseus // *War and Society in the Greek World.* Ed. by J. Rich and G. Shipley. L., 1993. P. 64–76; here: 67 (for the general proliferation of this war custom in Homeric Greece).

him leave. Hector *e.g.* once deliberated whether it might be sensible to offer (in addition to kidnapped Helena) half of all the goods that were inside the walls of Ilion to Achilles and the other Greeks, thus buying them off—obviously quite a traditional way an army under attack could take its resort to. (In fact it proved to be useless to Hector, but the reason was only that Achilles—at least as it seemed to Hector—was not a usual foe but an enemy who harboured a personal grudge against him)²⁰. And also the attackers in one of the pictures on Achilles' new shield had this war custom in mind: Some of them wanted to besiege the town until it was captured, but some others wanted to be content with half of all the goods that were within and then leave the town in peace²¹. «A standard form of conditional surrender does exist», writes van Wees, «whereby the city under attack may escape sacking by giving up half of its movable wealth to the enemy».

This generally accepted Homeric war custom in mind, we can now return to Tyrtaios and his «donkeys»—those people who were «suffering under heavy yokes, by painful force compelled to bring their masters half of all the produce that the soil brought forth». Now, I think, it is quite easy to explain what wood their yokes were originally carved from: Even if there was no other hint to this end, the fact that they had to deliver halves in combination with the fact that (as far as I can see) deliverances of halves in early Greece were known as a war custom only makes a very strong point for the assumption that Tyrtaios' «donkeys» in fact were the unlucky victims of some Spartan military effort. But were they Helots as well?

To answer this question we should have a closer look at the halves the subdued Messenians had to deliver according to Tyrtaios. Although it seems hardly debatable that these halves—deliverances that Tyrtaios promised to his soldiers in times of war!—must be taken to be a hint to the underlying Homeric war custom, they cannot be said to be exactly the same both in the *epos* and in Tyrtaios' verses. There are two main differences. The first one: According to the Homeric war custom the people under attack had to deliver one half of everything they owned at the very moment. Not so in the case of Tyrtaios' Messenians: As they had to hand over half of all the soil brought forth, there must have been some continuity in their payments. There must have been more stability in their exploitation than in the cases of the besieged cities of the Homeric *epos*. And the second difference: After having delivered half of everything from inside the walls, *i.e.* after having paid the ransom, according to the Homeric war custom the besieged people should (and usually would) be left in peace. Not so in the case of Tyrtaios' «donkeys»: As their deliverances obvi-

²⁰ *Il.* XXII.111–128.

²¹ *Il.* XVIII.509–512.

ously went on and on, they cannot have been left in peace by their offenders. Obviously their attackers did not leave.

What we can deduce from these differences is that the Spartans during their fights against the Messenians not only took over a war custom they knew from the Homeric *epos* (or maybe: ... that the Spartans had ever since been practising a war custom which also found its way into Homer's descriptions of wars and raids), but that they also developed this custom and made it fit the new needs and interests that must have arisen after the conquest of Messenia: the interest to establish a stable domination there. Compared to Homeric warfare (or «warfare», as these wars were usually nothing but raids) this problem was quite a new one: No Homeric hero ever tried to establish a permanent control in some distant country, and thus the Homeric war customs had to be adapted to fit the Spartans' new problem. One of the steps they took was to replace the deliverance of half of all the wealth—a deliverance that seemed adequate to a raid, but inappropriate to a long-lasting political domination—by the deliverance of half of all the crops; another one was not to let the enemy free and in peace, though having received the ransom.

Especially this second step seems most offensive: How, you wonder, could the Spartans simply violate the treaties that regularly were the basis and marked the beginning of some such agreements between two opposing armies²²? There is, I think, only one way to explain how they managed to avoid a breach of the contract and thus evade the gods' wrath: the invention (or the development) of the well-known declaration of war on the Helots. Year by year, so we are told²³, when the ephors assumed office—*i.e.* in autumn²⁴, after the end of the harvest, after the crops had been halved and after the old liability had thus been wiped out—they declared war on them, thereby creating a new situation of war that would make the Helots buy their attackers off anew for the next twelve months to come, though only for another declaration of war to be issued on them, and so on. And though we do of course not know the exact wording of this declaration, it is at least possible to make some assumption: Quite old as it must have been we should expect it to parallel other declarations of war from the archaic times. Two of them are known and pertinent: First the declaration of war which Menelaus and Odysseus were said to have made on the Trojans when reaching Ilion, and then the one Themistocles issued when starting to besiege the town of Paros: «Having there disembarked and encamped», Herodotus tells us about the Greek arrival on the

²² See *e.g.*: *Il.* III.103–107.

²³ Aristot. *Fr.* 538 Rose (= Plut. *Lyc.* 27.7).

²⁴ BUSOLT G., SWOBODA H. *Griechische Staatskunde* II. München³, 1926. S. 686 with n. 5.

²⁵ Hdt. II.118 (*ad Il.* III.205–224).

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plain of Troy²⁵, «they sent to Ilion messengers ... These, on coming within the city walls, demanded restitution of Helen and the possessions which Alexandrus had stolen from Menelaus and carried off ... But the Teucrians then and ever afterwards declared, with oaths and without, that neither Helen nor the goods claimed were with them ... But the Greeks thought that the Trojans mocked them, and therewith besieged the city, till they took it.» Though not said *expressis verbis*, this «declaration of war» looks very much like a demand for booty plain and simple—a character that becomes even clearer in the second case: Having reached Paros, Themistocles declared war on the city by sending a message according to which the Parians should hand him over 100 talents; otherwise, he told them, he would not lead his army away before having taken the town²⁶. To cut it short: An archaic «declaration of war» was nothing but a ritualized extortion—and this is exactly what we would suppose the annual Spartan declaration of war on the Helots to have been.

Having understood the system of exploitation and its historical roots, we can return to our question and ask ourselves once again if the dependency Tyrtaios described really was Helotage (or, maybe, an early kind of it). The answer, I think, is now quite easy, because the parallels between the living-conditions and legal traits of Tyrtaios' «donkeys» and the classical Helots are more than close—in fact they are simply the same: As «Helots»—*i.e.* as «prisoners of war»²⁷—the classical Helots were forced to deliver a fixed *quota* (as a ransom, as we now know). Just like Tyrtaios' unlucky Messenians, however, they could never realistically hope for freedom and peace after having paid the ransom (because another declaration of war would follow, as we now perceive). And above all: Just like Tyrtaios' Messenians, who were constantly paying their attackers off with eternal ransoms, also the classical Helots lived in a situation that can hardly be described by legal terms: free—*i.e.* enemies—is what they were from the one point of view, unfree—*i.e.* overpowered and enslaved enemies—what they were from the other. They could be taken to be private property—*i.e.* human booty, overpowered in war, enslaved and distributed among the victorious warriors—, but just as soon you can take them to be a public, a common good or rather a public enemy (as the basis of their enslavement was nothing else but a public declaration of war the Spartan state as a whole issued every year on the Helots as an equally enclosed citizenry). And, moreover, all the restrictions the Spartan community as a whole imposed on the single Spartan Helot-owner can be explained by

²⁶ Hdt. VI.133.

²⁷ For the etymology see LOTZE D. *Metaxy eleutheron kai doulon*. Studien zur Rechtsstellung unfreier Landbevölkerungen in Griechenland bis zum 4. Jahrhundert v.Chr. Berlin, 1959. S. 26; DUCAT J. *Les Hilotes*. Athens, 1990. P. 10.

these historical roots. Thus, *e.g.*, it is a matter of course that no-one could be allowed to extract higher deliverances from his Helots than 50%—as the basis of Helotage was the war custom described above. Of course no Spartiate could be allowed to manumit one of his Helots if the relation between them was a relation of war—such a behaviour would simply have been fraternization. And it goes without saying that no Spartiate could be allowed to sell his Helots outside the country, if all the Helots together formed the booty the Spartan state as a whole wanted to live from (and so on). So, all in all we should not doubt that Tyrtaios' pitiful «donkeys» in fact were Helots.

Helotage—this is the result of my considerations—thus proves to be a kind of slavery that had not been shaped by legal thinking about ownership and possession or freedom and slavery (and thus can hardly be explained by applying these *criteria*). Helotage was quite a different thing. Its invention—so it seems—was nothing but the institutionalization and eternalization of a typical archaic situation of war (including some adaptations in detail). Thus Helotage was shaped as the most heroic form of slavery thinkable—that form that perceived the owner to be the victorious hero, the slave to be his inferior enemy, and the slave's deliverances to be a ransom he paid in acknowledging his opponent's superiority.

СПАРТАНСКАЯ ИЛОТИЯ: ХАРАКТЕР И ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЕ

Штефан Линк

Нет серьезных оснований для сомнений в том, что происхождение института спартанской илотии было связано с вооруженной экспансией Спарты в отношении Мессении в период I и II мессенских войн. Поэтому стихи Тиртея, согласно которым проигравшие мессенцы должны были «впредь отдавать половину того, что приносили поля», можно рассматривать как поэтическое описание положения илотов (именно на такой позиции и стоит, действительно, большинство современных исследователей). Исходную точку, к которой восходит этот порядок, мы можем установить, обратившись к военным традициям, описанным в поэмах Гомера. Речь должна идти, в частности, об обычае откупа, с помощью которого осажденный город мог спастись, согласившись передать половину всего своего движимого имущества. Приспосабливая эту традицию к необходимости установления устойчивого доминирования в Мессении, спартанцы как раз и изобрели *илотию*—форму рабства, которую невозможно объяснить удовлетворительным образом (а, значит, невозможно и правильно понять), применяя лишь юридические критерии, как, например, бинарные оппозиции «свободный»—«несвободный» или «общественная собственность»—«частная собственность». Более правильно, видимо, объяснять институт илотии в терминах войны: с одной стороны—героизм и победа, с другой—поражение и подчинение; в качестве соединительной связи между этими двумя сторонами выступала обязанность побежденных платить выкуп, а обычай ежегодного объявления войны илотам при таком угле зрения должен рассматриваться как «юридическое» основание для всего этого.